

Report

Entitled "*Building a Europe of Asylum*" in reference to section IV of the draft European Pact on Immigration and Asylum, the **Paris conference of 8 and 9 September 2008 laid the groundwork for the second phase of the Common European Asylum System** in line with the programme drawn up in The Hague in 2004 and in the context of the work on the draft European Pact on Immigration and Asylum presented by the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

This meeting facilitated a global exchange between the European decision-makers in the field of asylum (ministers from the 27 Member States of the European Union, the European Commission, the European Parliament), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the representative of the International Organization for Migration, and civil society (representatives of non-governmental organizations, national and European associations, and experts).

After the opening speech by Brice Hortefeux, the French Minister for Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Mutually-Supportive Development, the Monday morning plenary session (8 September) provided the opportunity for the following participants to speak: Jacques Barrot, the European Commission Vice-President responsible for Justice, Freedom and Security; Gérard Deprez, the President of the LIBE Committee of the European Parliament; Wolfgang Schäuble, the German Minister for the Interior; Tobias Billström, the Swedish Minister for Migration and Asylum; Annemie Turtelboom, the Belgian Minister for Migration and Asylum; Neoklis Sylikiotis, the Cypriot Minister for the Interior; Roberto Maroni, the Italian Minister for the Interior; Nebahat Albayrak, the Netherlands' State Secretary for Justice; and Antonio Guterres, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Drawing on the experiences of the first phase of the European asylum policy, the speakers agreed that improvements were needed to respond to three needs: greater harmonisation of the Member States' policies; guaranteeing the protection due to persons seeking protection; and promoting solidarity between Member States and with non-Member States.

The three round tables organised on Monday afternoon, 8 September, facilitated discussion between the associations in a spirit of constructive dialogue.

The first round table dealt with practical cooperation in the field of asylum and included the following participants: Lin Homer, the director-general of the UK Border Agency, and member of the steering committee of the General Directors of Immigration Services Conference (GDISC); Michael Kleinhans, the director of the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees; Mario Morcone, prefect and head of the Department of Civil Liberties and Immigration of the Italian Ministry of the Interior; and Jean-François Cordet, the director-general of the French Office for the protection of refugees and stateless persons. Practical cooperation was deemed to be an indispensable tool in bringing the decision-making processes of the Member States closer together with regard to asylum and the participants agreed on the need to create a European support office with regard to asylum as soon as possible to serve as a structure for enhanced cooperation between the Member States.

The second round table dealt with the handling of applications for asylum beyond the borders of the European Union and with developing solidarity with third countries and

included the following participants: Vincent Cochetel, resettlement director at the United Nations High Commission for Refugees; Philippe Boncour, representing the International Organization for Migration; Ola Henrikson, Sweden's director-general for immigration; and Olivier Brachet, the director-general of *Forum Réfugiés*. The participants felt that the practice of resettlement on a voluntary basis, in cooperation with the UNHCR, should be developed by the Member States, and also discussed the creation of legal means of entry for persons in need of protection, regional protection programmes and the need for better integration of asylum issues in setting and implementing the EU's foreign policy.

The third round table dealt with the future Common European Asylum System and included the following participants: Jean-Louis de Brouwer, immigration director from the European Commission; Philippe de Bruycker, professor at the *Université libre de Bruxelles*; Bjarte Vandvik, General Secretary of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles; and Jean-Pierre Guardiola, head of the Department for Asylum at the French Ministry of Immigration. All the participants expressed their agreement with the aims of the Common European Asylum System, emphasising the convergence and complementarity of the draft European Pact and the European Commission's action plan, which is based on the need to offer an increased level of protection to persons in need of it, while ruling out the creation of a Community body for handling applications for asylum. The Common European Asylum System will have three main objectives: harmonising the Member States' legislation, enhancing the practical cooperation and developing the solidarity between Member States, for one part and with third countries, for another.

In view of all the exchanges and in particular the high expectations presented during the round tables, the European ministers and the European Commission Vice-President responsible for Justice, Freedom and Security, agreed to accelerate the planned timetable for carrying out the work necessary to harmonise legislation and to create a European Support Office, which should be set up in the first half of 2009.

Lastly, in response to the Maltese request for enhanced solidarity within the EU in view of the massive influx of refugees into Malta, the French Presidency and the Commission recalled the European instruments of solidarity that already exist in this area and the ministers agreed to continue this discussion in the context of the final talks on the European Pact on Immigration and Asylum.